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Chapter 1 Digital Millennials: Their Stance Towards the Bible

This study of the Bible and digital millennials principally considers three areas: stance, use and social media. This chapter considers how young adults described their feelings, attitudes, beliefs and views about the Bible. These phenomena can be described as someone's "stance" towards the Bible, something akin to their general disposition. Whilst it is relatively common for Bible surveys to explore some of these aspects, such as belief, our approach is broader, understanding there to be many factors that influence how people relate to the Bible. To that end multiple questions are used to provide a wide variety of data that, when brought together, paint a vivid picture of how digital millennials perceive the Bible.

The body of this chapter outlines the six questions asked in this area and explores the responses of these young adults. At the end, these findings are discussed and brought into conversation with other studies on the place of the Bible in contemporary society or theories of religion. In doing so we argue that a dominant stance held by digital millennials is one of qualified indifference towards the Bible.

Digital Millennials' Feelings Towards the Bible

Those surveyed were asked how they felt about the six major religions in Britain and their corresponding sacred texts. Specifically they were asked:

How would you describe your feelings towards each of the following religions and sacred texts?

They were invited to respond using a five point Likert scale to indicate how positively or negatively they felt towards each. This question purposely considers their affective response, their feelings. Often Bible surveys focus on belief, knowledge or use but not the emotions.

Digital millennials felt most positive towards the Bible (38%), followed by the Tripitaka (Buddhist sacred text) (25%). Accordingly, Christianity (41%) and Buddhism (38%) were the religions they felt most positive about (see fig. 3).

Figure 3: Feelings Towards the Six Main Religions in Britain and their Sacred Texts

Religion / Sacred Text	Positive	Neither Positive nor Negative	Negative	Don't Know
Christianity	41%	39%	15%	5%
Bible	38%	40%	16%	6%

Buddhism	38%	42%	11%	8%
Tripitaka	25%	51%	11%	9%
Hinduism	27%	49%	12%	15%
Vedas	21%	52%	12%	13%
Judaism	23%	53%	14%	10%
Torah	23%	52%	13%	12%
Sikhism	23%	53%	12%	14%
Guru Granth Sahib	20%	44%	12%	7%
Islam	21%	44%	29%	8%
Qur'an	19%	51%	28%	18%

(n= 1,943)

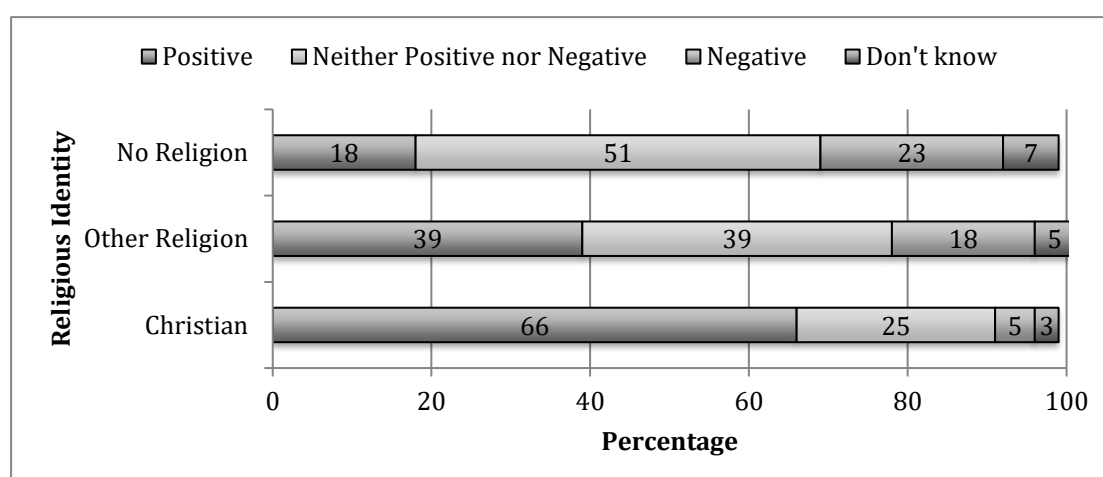
However, although approximately 40% of digital millennials felt positive about the Bible and Christianity a similar number felt neither positive nor negative towards them and approximately 15% had negative feelings. Indeed, for all the other sacred texts listed these young adults were most likely to have neutral feelings (neither positive nor negative): Guru Granth Sahib 44%; Tripitaka 51%; Qur'an 51%; Vedas 52%; and Torah 52% (the data for the corresponding religions were similar).

Thus at the start of this enquiry the first picture which emerges is that many digital millennials have neither positive nor negative feelings towards these six sacred texts and their religions. The slight exception is the Bible and Christianity (along with Buddhism) towards which a similar number of people feel positive as have neutral feelings. The reasons for this will be discussed at the end of the chapter, but at present it is sufficient to highlight the sizeable number of people who responded indifferently (i.e. neither positively nor negatively) to the Bible and all other texts and religions.

Whilst it would be interesting to explore the breakdown of all of this data the purpose of this study is to consider the Bible and digital millennials.¹ To that end the figure below presents the data for feelings towards the Bible in light of religious identity (see fig. 4).

¹ The concluding chapter explores a further aspect of this data.

Figure 4: Feelings Towards the Bible in Relation to Religious Identity



(n= 1,879)²

This demonstrates that non-religious digital millennials are much more likely to feel indifferent towards the Bible (51%) than the other groups. Around one in every five of them (23%) feel negative towards the Bible, of all the religions they felt most positive about Buddhism (36%)³ and the Tripitaka (21%) was viewed as positively as the Bible (18%). Those of a religion other than Christianity were as likely to feel positive (39%), as they were indifferent (39%), towards the Bible with two in ten (18%) feeling negative towards it. The religions they felt most positive about were Islam (45%) and Christianity (42%), and the two texts were the Qur'an (46%) and the Bible (39%). This in part reflects that 44% of those in the other religion category identified as Muslim (6% of the overall sample). Christians were most likely to feel positive about the Bible (66%) and least likely to feel negative (5%).

Words or Phrases Associated with the Bible

How someone feels about an object, event or activity is often related to what they associate with it. For that reason Bible agencies have used word association questions to gain insight into the Bible's "brand" (Barna, 2016, pp. 115-123). With the help of a twenty word matrix which Bible Society had produced these digital millennials were provided with a list of twenty two words or phrases and asked:

Which of the following words of phrases do you most associate with the Bible?

² The sample of 1,879 is lower than 1,943 as it excludes the 3% who choose "prefer not to say" when asked about their religious affiliation. In addition to this not all figures will add up to 100%. This is usually due to the rounding up or down of individual percentages.

³ 20% felt positive towards Christianity

Those surveyed could choose up to three, ranking them according to how strongly they connected them with the Bible. This format was used in subsequent questions (see Chapters 2 and 4) and the results for the first response and the total for all three often, but not always, mirrored each other. We principally focus on the first response because regular Bible users may have been more likely to provide two or three responses compared to those who rarely engaged with the Bible. Thus the top three data may be skewed slightly towards regular Bible readers and this was something we were unable to quantify.

With reference to the words or phrases that were ranked first, there were two leading responses, the first being “Word of God” and the other “I do not associate any of these words with the Bible” (see fig. 5).

Figure 5: Words Associated with the Bible

Phrase	Percentage who Ranked the Statement First	Percentage who Ranked the Statement in their Top Three
Word of God	13%	29%
I do not associate any of these words with the Bible	13%	13%
Myth	9%	22%
Historical	8%	24%
Moral Guide	6%	21%
Wisdom	6%	17%
Untrustworthy	5%	15%
God’s revelation	5%	14%
Boring	5%	14%
Irrelevant	4%	15%
Sayings	4%	13%
Hopeful	4%	13%
Truth	4%	12%
Inspiring	3%	11%
Challenging	3%	8%
God-breathed	2%	7%
Relevant	2%	6%
Poetry	1%	5%
Daunting	1%	5%
Coherent	1%	3%
Impenetrable	1%	3%
Other	1%	2%

(n= 1,943)

The popularity of the phrase “Word of God” may reflect Britain’s Christian religious heritage and current population where more digital millennials belong to Christianity (34%) than any other religion. What is unclear is whether this phrase has been chosen because the individual believes that the Bible is in

someway a divine book or due to the popular use of this phrase within British culture without affirming any sacrality. The popularity of the response “I do not associate any of these words with the Bible” may point towards a view of the Bible not represented in the words provided, however a varied range were available and only 2% indicated “other”. It may reflect a desire not to comply with the survey or something else. It is unclear exactly what people meant by indicating this. The next most popular choice “myth” lends itself to the belief that the Bible is something akin to a fairy tale and this contrasts “historical,” which may indicate a belief in, or awareness of, the Bible retelling a historical narrative.

When exploring the words or phrases people associated with the Bible by religious identity those with no religion and from a religion other than Christianity were most likely to indicate that they did not associate any of the words listed with the Bible. On the other hand Christians were most likely to choose “Word of God” (see fig. 6). Significantly, every group link the Bible to the phrase “Word of God”, including those with no religion. This raises questions such as: In what way is Word of God an underlying view of the Bible that cuts across religious groups? And why is this the case?

Figure 6: Most Popular Words Associated with the Bible in Relation to Religious Identity

No Religion	Other Religion	Christian
I do not associate any of these words with the Bible (16%)	I do not associate any of these words with the Bible (19%)	Word of God (18%)
Myth (15%)	Word of God (11%)	Wisdom (10%)
Word of God (10%)	Moral guide (9%)	Truth (8%)
Historical (9%)	Wisdom (7%)	Historical (7%)
Untrustworthy (8%)	Truth (5%)	Moral guide (7%)
Boring (7%)	Historical (5%)	God’s revelation (7%)
Irrelevant (7%)	God’s revelation (5%)	Hopeful (6%)

(n= 1, 879)

Having earlier clarified that the focus of this (and other questions) is on the first response, in this instance when the data was collated for the top three responses (first, second and third) a different picture emerged.⁴ Those who identify with a religion preferred:

- Word of God (24% other religion, 44% Christian).

⁴ The phrase “I do not associate any of these words with the Bible” is not in the top three responses because when it was chosen it was done so singly, whereas all other terms were typically chosen along with one or two others.

- Moral guide (20% other religion, 27% Christian).
- Wisdom (20% other religion, 27% Christian).

Whilst those who did not identify with a religion chose:

- Myth (36%).
- Historical (26%).
- Irrelevant (26%) (“untrustworthy” was fourth with 25%).

The similarity between the Christian and the other religious group provokes the questions: Do the terms that have been chosen typify how sacred texts in general are understood by digital millennials? Or are they specific to the Bible? And what are the similarities and differences in how Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists understand the Bible to be the Word of God, or a moral guide, or wisdom?

The “myth” and “historical” labels that were highlighted earlier are principally used by those with no religion and this potentially sheds light on the way in which “historical” is being imagined, for it is not Christians who are choosing to use this label but non-religious young adults. What is unclear however is what connotations these terms carry for them, which points to the need for further research.

The Role of the Bible in the Lives of Digital Millennials

In order to capture the status which these young adults felt the Bible should have in their lives a five point Likert scale was created and they were invited to indicate the degree to which they (dis)agreed with the following statement:

The Bible should have supreme authority in guiding my beliefs, views and behaviour.

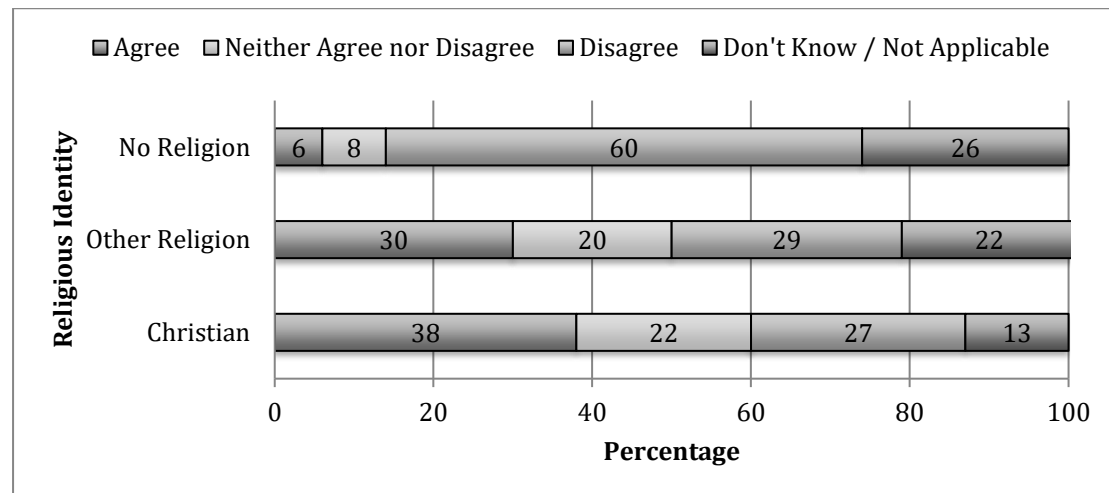
This question is similar to many used (Field, 2014, pp. 516-517; Barna, 2016, pp. 17-18) and probes the sense of authority and influence which an individual thinks the Bible should, or should not, have in his or her life.

Around four out of ten (43%) digital millennials disagreed with the statement and two out of ten (21%) agreed with it. A further two out of ten (21%) indicated “don’t know” or “not applicable”, whilst a final 15% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Although the earlier question concerning people’s feelings about the Bible highlighted a high degree of neutrality (40%) that was not evident in this case (15%). Where in the earlier question just under 40% felt positive towards the Bible here only 21% agree that the Bible should have supreme authority in their life. This latter group highlight the positive qualification that is required, for not everyone views or treats the Bible indifferently; some view it very highly.

Breaking the data down into religious groupings highlights that: 60% of those with no religion disagreed that the Bible should be their supreme authority; 30% of those who identify with another religion agree with the statement and a similar number disagreeing with it; and 38% of Christians affirm that the Bible should be their supreme authority (see fig 7).

Figure 7: The Bible's Authority in Relation to Religious Identity



(n= 1,879)

A further comparison with the earlier question about feelings towards the Bible is helpful. Whilst approximately half of all non-religious people (51%) felt neither positive nor negative about the Bible, now a majority (60%) reject the Bible as an authority in their life. This suggests a general indifference towards the Bible as long as it does not impinge upon them, for when it does it is rejected.

It is perhaps surprising that 30% of those from another religion believe that the Bible should be a supreme authority in their life. It seems reasonable to assume that they are not affirming an exclusivity to the Bible which some Christians do (and is implied in the statement). It is more likely that it reflects a general valuing of the Bible as a sacred text, or as one their own religion treats with respect, as is the case for Muslims. The figures for Christians may seem low to some, for just over a third (38%) affirm that the Bible should be a supreme authority in their life. This data though reflects the breadth of Christianity that is represented. For example, when the Christian group was subdivided it was noted that churchgoers were more likely to agree with the statement (61% agree and 18% disagree) and non-churchgoers were more likely to disagree (19% agree and 39% disagree).

Relationship with the Bible

The survey also explored in what way, if any, these young adults thought of themselves as having a relationship with the Bible. A relationship often involves interaction. To that end this question explores peoples' stance towards the Bible without focusing only on feelings or beliefs, but draws on both along with other

elements such as practice. This question built on the hypothesis that millennials are highly relational, valuing contact with older generations and those beyond their immediate circle of friends (although those making this claim focus on the USA, e.g. Rainer and Rainer, 2011, p. 19). It also ties to literary theories that understand the relationship between the reader and the text to be important (Rosenblatt, 1995). Additionally, the relationship terms used in the question were based on Facebook's relationship status options, the most popular social media platform used by digital millennials. Thus these young adults were provided with a list of ten relationship descriptors and asked:

Which of the following statements, if any, best describe your relationship with the Bible?

Around six out of every ten (62%) digital millennials had little or no relationship with the Bible. This compares with just over one out of every ten (13%) who described their relationship with the Bible as either "exciting" or "very close", (see figure 8).

Figure 8: Relationship with the Bible

Statement	Response
Don't have one	48%
Minimal	14%
It's complicated	7%
Interested – but don't know where to start	7%
Exciting	7%
Very close	6%
Broken	4%
Just beginning	4%
Coming to an end	2%
Other	2%

(n= 1,943)

In light of the majority of these digital millennials not identifying as Christian, it is perhaps not too surprising that 62% indicate they have little or no relationship with the Bible. This ties with later data explored in Chapter 2 showing a similar percentage engage with the Bible once a year or less (61%). In the same vein, where 13% described their relationship with the Bible in very positive terms 13% also engaged with the Bible a few times a week or more.

A relationship is a connection between at least two objects and in British society some objects are spoke of in relational terms more than others. For instance, it is relatively common for someone to speak about their relationship with a work colleague but it is rare for them to speak about their relationship with their fridge door, even though they may see their fridge door more often than their colleague. Thus it may be that in responding to this question some of those who replied "I don't have a relationship" were expressing the sentiment that the Bible is the type of object which they do not categorise as being relational (much like a

fridge door). Whatever the case, many digital millennials have a weak or non-existent relationship with the Bible or view it as an object which they do not think of in relational terms.

When the data was broken down by religious identity the first and second answers for all three groups were the same: I don't have a relationship with the Bible and it is minimal. The proportions were different, with 81% of non-religious people, 52% of those with another religion and 38% of Christians responding in this way. It was only by the third choice that those with a sense of religious identity responded more positively than those who identified as not religious (see fig. 9).

Figure 9: Most Popular Type of Relationship with the Bible in Relation to Religious identity

No Religion	Other Religion	Christian
Don't have one (71%)	Don't have one (34%)	Don't have one (22%)
Minimal (11%)	Minimal (18%)	Minimal (17%)
It's complicated (5%)	Exciting (9%)	Exciting (13%)
Broken (4%)	Very close (9%)	Very close (12%)
Interested but don't know where to start (3%)	It's complicated (7%)	Interested but don't know where to start (12%)
	Just beginning (6%)	It's complicated 9%

(n= 1,879)

Such a distribution is not surprising, and the Christian profile corresponds with earlier data showing that only 38% of Christians affirmed that the Bible should be a supreme authority in their lives. Indeed, when this group were further subdivided, churchgoers were most likely to describe their relationship as exciting (23%) or very close (20%), whilst non-churchgoers were more likely to say they did not have a relationship with the Bible (37%) or it was minimal (22%).

What Would They Ask God About the Bible?

Until now all the questions used were closed, limiting the type of response available. In order to provide these digital millennials with an opportunity to express some of their own thoughts, feelings or concerns about the Bible they were asked:

If you could ask God anything about the Bible, what would you ask?

This hypothetical question gave these young adults the opportunity to write an open response of up to 60 characters. It was an indirect approach and provided another lens through which their stance could be appreciated.

Around 6 in 10 digital millennials (58%) did not respond, suggesting that they had no meaningful question to ask (see fig 10).

Figure 10: Questions Asked of the Bible

Question/Response	Percentage
No meaningful question asked (e.g. left blank)	58%
Asked about a specific issue related to making sense of the Bible (e.g. "Who wrote the gospels?")	12%
Made a comment about the Bible, God or Christianity (e.g. "God is as realistic as Santa")	11%
Asked a theological/philosophical/religious question about a different subject (e.g. "Why does cancer exist?")	8%
Asked why is it hard to make sense of the Bible (e.g. "Why is it so confusing?")	8%
Asked for help in understanding the Bible (e.g. "What are the most important teachings or messages?")	4%

(n= 1,943)

It was noted previously that approximately 60% of these young adults had little or no relationship with the Bible. Now, when given the opportunity to ask a question about the Bible a similar number respond by indicating they have no question to ask. It may be that some reject the premise of the question, such as that God exists, and so have not engaged with it. However, it may also indicate a general disinterest in the Bible or a belief that they know the Bible's content and consider it uncontroversial. Perhaps the Bible does not, and has not, stimulated them, so when given the opportunity they find they have nothing to ask.

Unlike earlier, the three religious groups were reasonably similar in their responses to this question (see fig. 11), suggesting that even for Christians the Bible is not as stimulating as might be thought. Furthermore, churchgoing did not make a significant difference to people's lack of response.

Figure 11: Questions Asked of the Bible in Relation to Religious Identity

Question/Response	No Religion	Other Religion	Christian
No 'meaningful' question asked	58%	63%	57%
Asked about a specific issue related to making sense of the Bible	13%	9%	11%
Made a comment about the Bible, God or Christianity	13%	13%	13%
Asked a theological/philosophical/religious question about a different subject	8%	6%	5%
Asked why is it hard to make sense of the Bible	6%	4%	4%
Asked for help in understanding the Bible	2%	7%	7%

(n= 1,879)

The tendency to not ask a meaningful question across the subgroups could lead to the conclusion that many millennials do not think of the Bible as a controversial, stimulating or provocative book. Rather they may think of it as a text from which positive teachings, guidance or encouragement can be found, but nothing contentious or polemical. Alternatively it may be suggested that this question is one few chose to answer because it was an open question and desire to complete the survey quickly cut across all those taking part. However, other open questions in the survey were completed by at least 85% of the respondents, and a degree of consistency in their lack of engagement would have been expected.

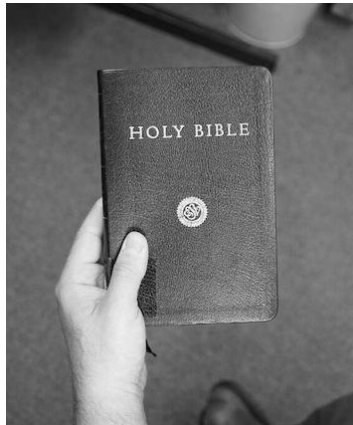
Paper or Digital Bible Image?

Finally, in light of this study's focus on the impact which digital technology may be having on these young adults' stance towards the Bible they were asked:

Please look at the following images. Which one are you most drawn to?

Please look at the following images. Which one are you most drawn to?

Image A



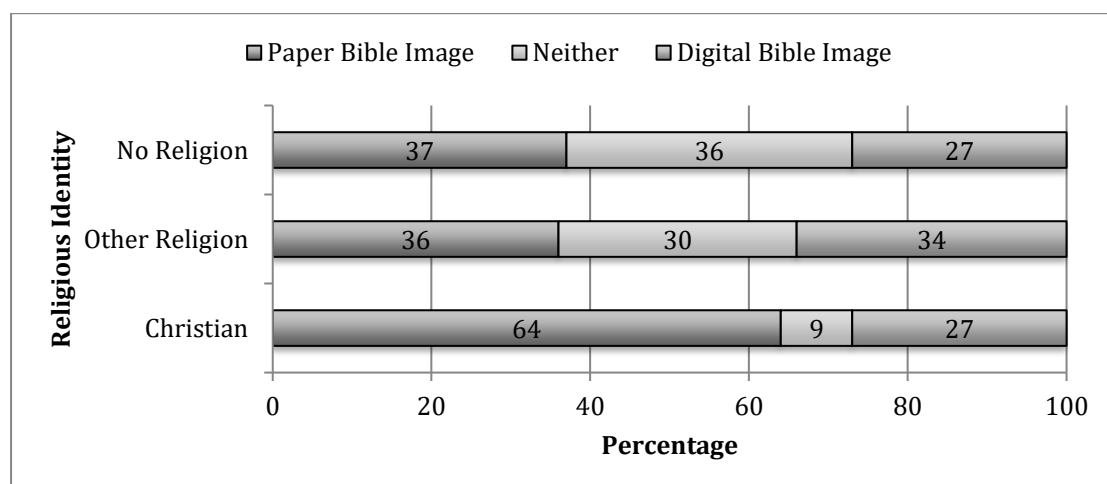
Or Image B



This is a type of branding question and it captures someone's response to the two images, one of a paper Bible (i.e. a book) and the other a digital one (i.e. on a smartphone). Nearly half (47%) of the digital millennials were drawn to the image of the paper Bible, just over a quarter (28%) preferred the image of the digital Bible and a final quarter (26%) were drawn to neither.

There was a distinction when exploring the role of religious identity. Christians were twice as likely to prefer the paper Bible image to the digital one (see fig. 12). It may be theorized that this is because the paper Bible is an object they are more likely to come across and positively associate with as they are more likely to attend church and own one themselves. However within the Christian subgroup there was no significant difference between churchgoers' and non-churchgoers' responses.

Figure 12: Paper/Digital Bible Image in Relation to Religious Identity



(n= 1,879)

Those who indicated that they preferred either the image of the paper Bible or the digital one were then asked why this was the case and given space to write

their response. The main reason why people preferred the image of the paper Bible was because they preferred books (30%), whilst the main reason people preferred the image of the digital Bible was because it looked nice (37%), (see fig. 13 and 14). When considering why Christians in particular preferred the image of a paper Bible, their responses were similar in order and percentage to those outlined in figure 13.

Figure 13: Reasons Given for Preferring the Paper Bible Image

Reason given	Percentage
I prefer books (e.g. "I prefer books to e-books")	30%
A sense of it being more traditional, sacred or personal (e.g. "This has more authority")	22%
Physicality of holding a book (e.g. "Can't beat a book in your hands")	14%
Aesthetically pleasing (e.g. "Big and black")	11%
What I normally use (e.g. "Used to have one of these when I was a child")	9%
Easier use/less distracting (e.g. "Nothing but the word in front of you")	5%
Can annotate, or flip through it (e.g. "You can write in it")	2%
Other response (e.g. "Hanh")	8%

(n= 904)

Figure 14: Reasons Given for Preferring the Digital Bible Image

Reason given	Percentage
Aesthetically pleasing (e.g. "Brighter than a book")	37%
Portable and user friendly (e.g. "The Bible is a lot more portable in this format")	22%
Adjustable and accessible (e.g. "Adjustable for me")	15%
Use their phone a lot and/or enjoy it. (e.g. "A phone goes with me everywhere")	12%
Other (e.g. "Don't know")	15%

(n= 536)

Earlier in the survey when these digital millennials were asked whether they normally read books using print or digital technology (e.g. eReader or tablet), 58% indicated print, 18% digital and 24% used both equally. Therefore the popularity of the paper Bible image sits well within this wider context where paper technology is normally used for reading. Those who typically read in this way were more likely to choose the image of the paper Bible (50%) than the

digital one (23%), and those who normally read using digital technology were as likely to choose the image of the paper Bible (37%) as the digital one (38%). Thus the type of reading technology commonly used impacted the image preferred.

Summary

A varied picture is emerging regarding the stance digital millennials have towards the Bible. Only 16% feel negative towards it with a larger percentage (40%) having more neutral, or positive (38%) feelings. The two phrases with which the Bible was most identified were “Word of God” and “I do not associate any of these words with the Bible”. However it was unclear why they choose these phrases. When asked if they agreed that the Bible should have supreme authority in guiding their lives 43% disagreed and 21% agreed. The figures for people’s relationship with the Bible were starker with 62% indicating they had little or no relationship with the Bible and only 13% describing it in positive language. Similarly when given the opportunity to ask anything about the Bible 58% had no meaningful question to ask. Finally, when these digital millennials were given an image of a paper and a digital Bible they preferred the paper one.

The Emergence of Qualified Indifference.

These questions were designed to probe various aspects of digital millennials’ stance towards the Bible and some of the data presented starts to outline the indifference with which they view the Bible. In particular note first that:

- Around six out of every ten young adults described themselves as having little or no relationship with the Bible.
- A similar number have no questions to ask about the Bible.
- Around four out of every ten disagree that the Bible should be a supreme authority in their lives.
- Around four out of every ten felt neither positive nor negative about the Bible.

As has been stated, these findings point towards a degree of indifference. With Rebecca Catto, indifference here refers to “a lack of concern and engagement, which is ethically ambivalent” (2017, p. 79).⁵ The Bible is a text these young adults do not have a meaningful connection with or strong feelings about.

Other comparable research has highlighted this phenomenon, as can be seen in Field’s overview of Bible surveys. What he did not find was a growing antagonism towards the Bible or love for it, but rather that the Bible was becoming less important for individuals and wider society. In other words, people were becoming more indifferent towards the Bible. He writes: “the Bible has been viewed as increasingly less significant in personal lives and less

⁵ See Quack and Schuh (2017a) for a larger discussion on definitions of religious indifference.

relevant to the needs of modern society" (2014, p. 518). Other recent studies have also noted this. Crossley found that people in Barrow-in-Furness viewed the Bible as irrelevant to much of their lives. Having analysed thirty interviews he notes, "it was clear that there was very little interest in issues of Christianity, the Bible, or religion, or at least very little interest in mentioning anything publicly" (2016b, p. 33). He also recounts undertaking an analysis of Facebook posts from Barrow-in-Furness and their lack of biblical content, highlighting the "baffled responses" to his own Facebook post on the critical study of religion and the Bible (p. 33). Therefore he concluded that although the then Prime minister (David Cameron) claimed the Bible as an authoritative source, it was one "rarely recognised among the Barrovian sample who saw through his ideological move" (p. 50).

This indifference towards the Bible should be seen as part of a wider indifference towards religion. The first question in the survey demonstrated that in general digital millennials tended not to have strongly positive or negative feelings towards any religion, but rather assumed a more neutral position. In the case of the Bible this neutrality was rejected only when forced to consider the Bible as a text that should impact their lives. Spencer recounts a similar finding in research published in 2005 that involved interviewing sixty non-churchgoers. He outlines how they described the Bible as having value for certain people or for teaching morals. However, this was only expressed when they had made clear that the Bible had no legitimate claims over their own lives. He concluded that a Bible "which made few (or preferably no) demands on them, was an acceptable Bible" (2005, p. 19). There is therefore a general indifference towards sacred texts, including the Bible, as long as they do not challenge personal autonomy.

Nonetheless, digital millennials were more positive about the Bible (and Christianity) than they were about other sacred texts (and religions). This qualifies the initial conclusion of indifference, and although the small positive disposition is not something regularly highlighted it can be found in other studies. For example, amongst the surveys that Field analysed, a telephone poll of around 1,000 British adults in 2000 found that 46% identified the Bible from a list of seven publications as having "the most positive influence on life in Britain today" (Ipsos Mori, 2001, n.p.); an online survey in 2011 found that between 29%-37% of millennials identified the Bible as "important, I don't read it often, but it's got valuable things to say" (ComRes, 2011, n.p.); and more recently in 2014 an online survey of over 2,000 British adults found that 37% identified the Bible as the most influential book at the moment (Folio Society Survey, 2014, n.p.). Field notes that there is a general level of acceptance "that the Bible should be taught in schools," something he suggests is because "most adults had first heard or read the Bible when at school themselves" (2014, p. 517). There is perhaps more to this, for the Bible has often been taught or used in school for ethical or moral debate (Reed *et al*, 2013). Correspondingly amongst British adults there is also a popular sense that the Bible may have value in the morals that it teaches (Crossley, 2016b, p. 54). For example, a recent YouGov poll of around 1,600 adults found that six of the Ten Commandments were still thought of as important principles to live by (YouGov, 2017). Thus, amongst digital

millennials in general there is a significant but small positive stance towards the Bible that should not be ignored.

This stance is principally held by (churchgoing) Christian millennials, which is unsurprising. However they are not alone in this. Those who identify with another religion appear more likely to view the Bible positively than negatively. That was certainly the case in this survey where they felt more positive (39%) than negative (18%) about the Bible and just under a third (30%) agreed that it should be a supreme authority in their life. (A similar number indicated it should not). Even amongst the non-religious there is a small but significant group who view the Bible positively, 18% having positive feelings towards it.

This positivity needs to be appreciated along with a negative stance that is also taken by a minority of young adults. These are people who have negative feelings towards the Bible, reject it as an authority and are likely to say they have no relationship with it. This group is principally made up of those who identify as not religious, of whom 23% have negative feelings towards the Bible, 60% indicate that it has no authority in their life, and 82% have little or no relationship with it. Whether this negativity is accompanied by hostility and antagonism is unclear and more research is required into this small group. Other surveys have noted this. A Bible Society survey found 27% disagreed with the claim that the Bible is an influence for good in society (Hewitt and Powys-Smith, 2011b, n.p.). ComRes found that 18-24 year olds were three times more likely to describe the Bible as “a dangerous book and should be ignored” (12%) compared with the wider population (4%) (2011).

It may be that people have had bad experiences of religion in general or Christianity more specifically which has resulted in a negative stance towards the Bible (Sherwood, 2012, pp. 9-72). It is perhaps more common that millennials have a greater awareness of global religions, and are aware that some use the Bible (and other sacred texts) to affirm morals or values they reject. They may also treat science as the filter through which all religious texts must pass prior to accepting them, which may result in the Bible becoming not only unimportant but an object of ridicule (Meredith, 2015).

Thus when considering the stance digital millennials have towards the Bible, we suggest that the term “qualified indifference” captures the survey’s findings. These are young adults who have little relationship with the Bible, do not have strong feelings towards it and when invited to, do not have any meaningful questions to ask about it. However there is a small subgroup who are positively disposed towards the Bible and a smaller subgroup who are negatively disposed to it.

Secondary Themes

There are three themes worth raising and following through the subsequent chapters. They concern other religions, gender and the digital shift. One of the surprising findings was how positively those of another religion viewed the Bible. In the various questions, they were consistently more positive about the

Bible than those who identified as not religious. They were twice as likely to have positive feelings for the Bible (39% other religion, 18% no religion), five times as likely to affirm that the Bible should be a supreme authority in their lives (30% other religion, 6% no religion) and six times as likely to describe their relationship with the Bible as exciting or very close (18% other religion, 3% no religion). Indeed on occasion they expressed views that were more positive than non-churchgoing Christians. For example only 9% of non-churchgoers described their relationship with the Bible as exciting or very close compared with 18% of people from a religion other than Christianity.

Those of another religion were not overwhelmingly positive. When asked to identify the word they most associate with the Bible the top response was “I do not associate any of these words” (19%) and around half (52%) have little or no relationship with the Bible. Moreover, they are a small group within the sample ($n = 267$) and so there is a greater margin of error associated with their data. Nonetheless, in light of the information available, they were more positively disposed to the Bible than the non-religious group (and the non-churchgoing group to a lesser extent). This relatively positive disposition may be because their religion views the Bible as a holy text due respect; a belief that their religious and moral values overlap with those promoted by the Bible (and Christianity); their religiosity having a pluralistic aspect and so valuing the sacred texts and artefacts of other religions; a corporate sense of religious identity and associated value with other religious people because of a presupposed threat from secular culture; being more comfortable with the idea of religion than those who identify as not religious; or viewing the Bible, as part of Christianity (the religion Britain is often identified with), as representing wider religiosity within the public space.⁶ In any case, what has been noted is a positive disposition towards the Bible.

In terms of gender, there is a popular understanding that in post-industrial countries women are more religious than men. Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas capture the extent of this phenomenon when writing:

Women are more religious than men. Indeed, for Christians in the West, the difference between men and women with respect to their religious lives has become one of the most pervasive findings in the literature. It shows on almost every indicator (practice, belief, self-identification, private prayer, etc.), and is found in almost every denomination (2008, p. 109).

With reference to Bible engagement, Field concluded that “on all measures women are more Bible-centric than men” (2014, p. 518). Therefore it would be expected that female digital millennials would have a more positive stance towards the Bible than their male counterparts, but this was not the case:

- 10% of women had an exciting or very close relationship with the Bible and 65% had little or no relationship with it, but 14% of men had a very positive relationship with the Bible and 58% had little or none.

⁶ Our thanks to David Heading for some of these suggestions.

- 18% of women agreed with the statement that the Bible should be a supreme authority in their life and 45% disagreed with it, however 23% of men agreed with the statement and 41% disagreed.
- Women were as likely to identify the Bible as “Word of God” (15%) as not associating any of the words with the Bible (14%), so too men linked the Bible with the phrase “Word of God” (11%) and did not associate any of the words with the Bible (12%).

There was one instance where women demonstrated a statistically significant positive difference to men and that concerned their feelings towards the Bible: 14% of women felt negative towards the Bible and 18% of men did (40% of women felt positive towards the Bible, more than the 37% of men who did, but this difference was not statistically significant at $p < .05$). This finding will be discussed in subsequent chapters, but for the present it is sufficient to highlight this unexpected data.

Finally, even though the sample represents digitally orientated millennials, they preferred the image of the paper Bible to the digital one. This may be in part because a paper Bible is a classic western image of a Bible, a book that continues to be sold and used. It could also be because many young adults (58%) principally read from paper books. Recent news headlines have quoted the British Publishers Association as indicating that eBook sales are in decline, and have been for the past two years (Campbell, 2018). The digital revolution has not resulted in the rejection of paper books so far, and this has been noted in other research as well. A 2013 survey of 1,420 16-24 year olds found that 62% preferred buying paper books to eBooks. The two main reasons for this were the price of eBooks and the physicality of paper books (Bury, 2013; Smith, 2013). The top reason digital millennials gave for the preference of the paper Bible image was “I prefer books”. This was the case amongst all who chose this image ($n = 904$) and was similarly the case amongst Christians when they were considered in isolation ($n = 434$). This preference for paper books is not a reason commonly given by scholars as they reflect on the differences between paper and digital Bible use. Some scholars have argued that Bible readers are more likely to form emotional bonds with a paper Bible than a digital one (Kukulska-Hulme, 2008, p. 388; Hutchings, 2015, p. 435). They argue that Bible users may have received a paper Bible at a significant occasion, such as a baptism, and may have made use of it for a number of years so that over time they identify it as “their” Bible. Others have suggested that reading a paper Bible leads to a more memorable and in-depth reading experience compared with using a digital device (Weaver, 2017; Siker, 2017; pp. 57-96). They note that the technology itself often influences the type of reading that takes place, with digital technology lending itself more to scanning and skimming compared with paper technology. What the data presented earlier showed however was that there are other factors, such as a preference for paper books, which spill over into how people think about the Bible and result in them preferring the image of the paper Bible.

Conclusion

In this study of digital millennials and the Bible, it is suggested that their stance towards the Bible demonstrates a significant degree of indifference. This is perhaps most clearly seen in their lack of relationship with the Bible and the neutral feelings they express towards it. This needs qualified however for a minority are positively disposed to the Bible and an even smaller minority view it negatively. The various aspects of this qualified indifference have been noted in other studies, although none have given it this label, as far as we know.

This though is only one brush stroke of digital millennials and the Bible and there is the possibility that someone may claim one thing about the Bible but live and act in a way that does not affirm those claims. Therefore the following chapter explores Bible use, something that will confirm, challenge or nuance this initial finding.